

Points of Discomfort: Reflections on Power and Partnerships in International Service-Learning

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In the field of international service-learning (ISL) there is an increasing call for practitioners to engage in critical reflection of the experiential aspects of their ISL programs. We take up this call by turning our attention to one particular dimension of our ISL course: our relationship with our host partner. Our analysis is grounded in our experience as ISL practitioners, and we use our own 'points of discomfort'—the moments in which our relationship with our host partner was unsettling or agitating—as our starting point. Throughout, we show how these 'agitated interactions' suggested contradictions between the rhetoric and the reality of ISL and led us to question the distinctiveness of the ISL identity, the practicality of reciprocity as a guiding framework, and where ISL fits within the ongoing colonialist project. We have emerged from this reflective process with a more 'encumbered' view of ISL practice, yet have found many ways to move forward from this new perspective.

The tremendous growth of international service-learning (ISL) experiences across university campuses, particularly short-term ISL programs, has been affirming as well as troubling to ISL scholar-practitioners. As programs that “combine academic instruction and community service in an international context” (Crabtree, 2008, p. 18), ISL programs aim to increase participants’ global awareness, build intercultural understanding and communication, and enhance civic mindedness and leadership skills (Berry & Chisholm, 1999). The growing body of research has affirmed that these goals are being achieved; for example, research has confirmed that participation develops civic participation skills (Schensul & Berg, 2004); expands understandings of diversity (Camacho, 2004); and serves as a transformational learning experience across a range of domains, including a better understanding of self, a shift in worldview associated with the political and the spiritual, and a heightened sense of civic responsibility (Kiely, 2004, 2005).

However, the growth of ISL programs has also raised some troubling concerns, many of which relate to the ways that the actual, on-the-ground activities seem to challenge or contradict the intended and purported aims of ISL. For example, while ISL aims to make a ‘real’ contribution to a host community, questions have arisen about the effectiveness, sustainability, and relevance of international service projects, such as whether such projects are fulfilling an actual need within the host community (Ver Beek, 2002). Questions have also arisen about unintended negative outcomes of ISL, such as the potential of ISL programs to reinforce the construction of the host com-

munity as needy (Crabtree, 2008) or position host communities as an object of study (Carrick, Himley, & Jacobi, 2000; Tilley-Lubbs, 2009). There has been a growing call within the field for ISL practitioners to engage in critical reflection of the experiential aspects of their ISL programs in an effort to uncover moments of contradiction between rhetoric and reality (Heron, 2007). As Himley (2004) contends:

...turning a careful, critical eye to the ethical desires, peculiar intimacies, agitated interactions, material realities, and power asymmetries...we can excavate and explicate both the immediate and broader relations of power that structure these encounters and identify opportunities for at least partially progressive practice or effects. (p. 423)

We take up this call in this paper by turning our attention to one particular dimension of our ISL course: our relationship with our host partners. In this paper, we critically reflect on the experiential realities that unfolded with the partnerships that we had established in the context of our course. Thus, within Himley’s (2004) recommendation, we focus primarily on the ‘agitated interactions’ that arose during our course. These are moments in which we felt particularly unsettled or uncomfortable with the way we were relating to our host partner—what we refer to as ‘points of discomfort.’

While there were others, we focus on three specific points of discomfort that kept rising to the surface in our post-trip conversations: a day of service in the garden, mealtimes at camp, and a trip into town. After a brief description of the course and the part-

ners, we turn our attention to the events as they unfolded and consider what might have led to the ‘agitation,’ and discuss what these moments have taught us about the practice of ISL.

The Course and Our Partners

The ISL course we reflect on in this paper is titled, “International Field Experiences in Recreation and Leisure,” which was a senior-level full-credit spring semester elective offered to students majoring in Recreation and Leisure Studies (our home department) in 2010. The course was developed as a departmental response to our university’s growing interest in internationalization and community engagement, both of which had been foregrounded in the university and faculty’s most recent academic plan. The broad course title was intended to allow different teachers in the department to develop and offer international field courses specific to their interests. The 2010 offering, which focused specifically on Cuba, was titled “Explorations of Cuba: Leisure, Culture, and Development in a Global Context.” The primary course objective was for students to emerge with a more robust understanding of the ways that recreation and leisure practices are shaped by and intertwined with culture, politics, and globalization. The intent of traveling to Cuba was to add an experiential perspective to the theoretical analysis as well as provide an opportunity for the students to develop leadership and instructional competencies in a cross-cultural setting.

In the preceding fall semester, of the 25 students who applied and were interviewed for the spring course, 17 were accepted (we were required to take a minimum of 15 students for financial feasibility; criteria for acceptance included the student’s year standing and grade point average, relevant practical experience, and past experience with groups or in an international setting). The group then began meeting in January on a twice-weekly basis to prepare for the trip. The academic content of the winter semester included seminars on various aspects of Cuba (e.g., history; significant events; health, education, and political systems). Some time was spent on preparation for travel (health and safety, what to expect, etc.). The final component was the preparation of specific recreation and outdoor education ‘lessons’ which students would ‘deliver’ as part of our program with one of our host partners (faculty and students in a Cuban recreation and outdoor education program) at a Canada-Cuba outdoor education camp, which we describe below.

Our sojourn, which ran for 18 days in spring semester, was divided into two main components. The first half took place in Havana and our time there was organized primarily by a faculty member in the department of foreign languages at the University of

Havana (UH). We had met our contact at UH in May 2009, when we accompanied a study abroad course taught by another faculty member at our university, who through his own initiative had formalized the relationship with UH. In our course, the focus for this first week in Cuba was to learn about different aspects of Cuban culture and society, and our colleague at UH helped facilitate this by organizing lectures with university faculty that focused on different topics. She also connected our students with English-speaking students at the university, who acted as hosts and cultural brokers. During this time, we also spent a day with Eco-Institute (pseudonym), a Cuban-based NGO that did environmental work, which we describe below.

Our second partner, with which we worked for the second half of the course, was the Department of Recreation at the Universidad de las Ciencias de Cultura Fisica y Deportes ‘Manuel Fajardo’ (MF)—Cuba’s national university for sport, physical education, and recreation. We met the faculty at MF in 2009 through our contact at UH, who arranged a meeting on our behalf. The MF Department of Recreation was extremely receptive to partnering with us, and in our first visit they proposed the idea for the May 2010 course—a week-long outdoor skills and practices ‘camp’ held at the National School of Speleology in Pinar del Rio province. They were keen on the camp because they were interested in developing their knowledge and skills in the broad area of outdoor and adventure education. We were happy to offer this service, and we returned in November 2009 to formalize the partnership with MF.

Points of Discomfort

First Point of Discomfort: The Garden Day of Service

Our first week in Cuba was organized similar to an education tour where we arranged our days according to themes such as history or politics. Each morning was spent in a lecture at the university, followed by a relevant field trip. One day was focused on the environment, and we planned our day through Eco-Institute, a Cuban NGO that had a strong reputation for environmental work. We had visited Eco-Institute the year before, and had been in contact with them over the year to plan this day. Along with learning about environmental issues and programs, we also had proposed the idea of doing some service work that day, and asked the Institute if there were any projects appropriate for a group of 19 (17 students and 2 instructors). The organization was receptive, and we arranged to work on a school garden project. Doing this planning with the local NGO gave us greater assurance that the service efforts would be directed

toward addressing a genuine community need (Porter & Monard, 2001).

After a morning visiting an organic farm and eating lunch at a downtown restaurant, we drove to a middle school in a quiet neighbourhood. We were excited to be visiting the school because we had heard that it had become particularly difficult for international visitors to gain access to schools in recent years; the story was that the quality of schooling had become so poor that Fidel Castro would not allow foreigners in to see them. Indeed, the entrance of the school was gated and a security guard was stationed; nevertheless, our guide was able to get us into the school. The classrooms formed the four walls of the school, with a large grassy courtyard in the middle. Our excitement to ‘serve’ quickly diminished when we came to realize that the school did not know we were coming and, further, there was no garden at the school. After some conversation between our Eco-Institute leader and a school official, we were given the go-ahead to dig up the grass so as to make a garden plot. The organization supplied us with two shovels, a pickaxe, and two buckets to use to complete our work. We did the best we could, but by the end of our day we had made little progress; it looked like we had done more damage than good. Our presence had also disrupted the school day completely, as students poured out of their classrooms to watch us work. We returned to our bus feeling extremely uncomfortable at the damage we had done and confused about the situation in which we had found ourselves. Most striking to us was the question posed to us as we left by our Eco-Institute leader: “So, was that what you wanted? To get your hands dirty?”

Since that day in the garden, we have wondered about this day and the way it had unfolded. In our planning, we had turned over all of the legwork to the Eco-Institute, a reputable NGO that we believed had a better understanding of local projects and where we could fit in. So, was the problem simply poor planning on the part of the NGO? Had they rushed the process, or forgotten to contact the school? Was the answer simply the need for more tools? While certainly more tools may have helped to make the day run more smoothly, it also may have worked to disguise what became apparent during this disastrous day—that as much as we may have constructed ourselves as ‘service-learners’ and distinct from ‘tourists,’ we needed to think more deeply about this distinction.

Confronting the Tourist in Us

In international travel, ‘the tourist’ has long been associated with negative connotations. Travel writing and even ethnographies have long condemned the ‘ugly tourist’—the creature for whom the culture and its people are objects to be consumed for personal

pleasure (Urry, 1990, 2002). It is a subject positioning from which most travelers, even if they *are* tourists, work to distance themselves (McCabe, 2005). As students and instructors of an ISL course, we made a similar distinction. We saw ourselves as *not tourists*, on the basis that because we were travelling primarily for education rather than pleasure, we inhabited a distinct and morally superior travel identity.

The *tourist* is derided for a number of reasons. One of the main ones, elaborated on by Urry (1992, 2002), is for the ways that the tourist imposes the “tourist gaze” on the host community. The tourist gaze, as Urry describes, is a socially organized way of seeing and experiencing a given locale. The tourist gaze is guided by the anticipation of pleasure and directed toward objects such as an ethnic group, landscape, or cultural performance. According to Dolby (2003, in Prins & Webster, 2010), the tourist gaze organizes the encounters of visitors with the ‘other,’ and reinforces an ‘othering’ process between visitors and the host community. Furthermore, the tourist gaze also produces a power differential as it relates to who has the power to gaze upon the other. In general, it is the tourist who sets the terms of the encounter and intrudes on the lives of those in the host community while their own relationships and home lives remain intact and undisturbed. Thus, the tourist gaze, by being able to penetrate people’s lives, maintains and upholds an asymmetrical power relationship between the tourist and the host community (Prins & Webster).

Certainly, there are other ways to travel that are less bound up with the tourist gaze. For example, since the 1990s, new forms of alternative tourism have begun to appear on the landscape, including volunteer tourism, a new form of ‘decommodified’ tourism that was, for the most part, organized by NGOs according to socially-oriented goals such as poverty alleviation or environmental restoration (Wearing, McDonald, & Ponting, 2005). For travellers, volunteer tourism offered an alternative way to travel that existed outside the tourist gaze, in that rather than engage in activities where the host community was expected to fulfill the pleasure of the tourist, the tourist engaged in activities that met the needs of the host community and that it was the host community that set the terms of the encounter. However, since this time, the distinction between ‘commodified’ and ‘decommodified’ tourism has become increasingly ambiguous. For-profit companies, recognizing the contemporary traveller’s *desire to serve* and ‘make a difference’ (Cook, 2004), have emerged on the landscape and are competing with NGOs and one another for their share of the volunteer traveller market. Volunteer tourism has become increasingly eclectic, with companies offering a wide range of ‘voluntourism’ programs that blend volun-

teering and recreational pursuits. Within NGOs, volunteer tourism is increasingly provided on a ‘fee for service’ basis, with the revenue earned from volunteers being used to offset other international development programs (Lyons & Wearing, 2008). Indeed, it is currently the norm for volunteer tourists to either pay for or raise funds to cover a significant share of the costs of their travel, regardless of the economic value of volunteer work they provide. As noted by Cousins, Evans, and Sandler (2009), “once the preserve of charities, the sector now hosts a proliferation of private companies...selling international conservation work to tourists as a commodity” (p. 2). All of these transformations make the distinctions among the roles of volunteer, service-learner, and tourist more ambiguous.

Our day of service is a case in point. When we think about our day in the school, we wonder about how our NGO leader constructed our group, its desires, and his organization’s obligations to meet them. For instance, how does the fact that we paid the NGO to plan and organize our day affect how the organization related to us, as well as to the school? Was an implicit power imbalance created by this fee for service arrangement? Did the NGO leader mark us as tourists with a ‘desire to serve,’ a desire that he aimed to fulfill regardless of the consequences? Was our discomfort with the question from him asking us if ‘this is what we wanted’ so uncomfortable because he was right—and the circumstances simply allowed us to recognize the intrusiveness of our request?

Second Point of Discomfort: Mealtimes at Camp

In the second week of our sojourn, we began our program with the faculty and students at UCCFD Manuel Fajardo. As a group of 50 or so (19 Canadians, the remainder Cubans), we boarded a bus from the university campus in Havana and made the three-hour trek to the outdoor school, which was located at the edge of the small village of Moncada at the foothills of the karst climbing and caving region in the Pinar del Rio province of Cuba. The site itself consisted of three main buildings: one building was the kitchen and dining area, and the other two were a mix of dormitory-style sleeping rooms and classrooms and offices. A separate building housed toilets and showers. The village of Moncada itself was small, with a population in the low hundreds, with an elementary school, a small store, and a health clinic.

The trip to the outdoor school was the culmination of a year-long collaborative planning process between ourselves and the faculty at MF. As we planned the program, we came to the arrangement that the Canadians would finance the camp by investing an amount of money comparable to what it would cost were we to stay in Havana, and use that money

to pay for food, travel, and other camp costs for the entire group, including the Cubans. In turn, the Cubans were able to offer free access to the outdoor camp. Additionally, as the on-site hosts, the faculty had taken the lead on logistics, and a few faculty and staff from MF had gone ahead a few days prior to prepare the camp. While the camp itself had two cooks and a maintenance worker, it soon became clear that we were such a large group that we created much more camp work than could be done by this small staff, particularly given the equipment with which the staff had available (e.g., one hot plate and two outdoor ovens). Throughout our time at the camp all the extra chores that were required to keep the camp running were done by faculty and teaching assistants from MF. At mealtimes, this service was particularly conspicuous, as Cuban faculty prepared the meals in the kitchen, served the plates of food to tables of waiting students, and cleaned up afterward. Requests to allow Canadians to pitch in were refused, we surmised, because our Cuban partners wanted to be gracious hosts. Within a couple of days our offers to help with mealtime chores dried up and we settled into the comfortable and familiar habit of sitting at tables and waiting to be served.

We have wondered about what led us to this way of relating. Although we had planned the content of our program collaboratively, we had not discussed how we would run the camp. The camp space was an open and undefined space, and as a group we were quite free to establish for ourselves the ways that we wished to work together, particularly when compared to the more scripted spaces of Havana life. How had we ended up establishing this kind of imbalanced relationship? When we planned our trip we used the ethic of *reciprocity* as our guiding philosophy. However, determining how reciprocity actually played out in the context of the international trip was at times difficult. For example, if reciprocity involves different but equally important contributions, might one conclude that our Cuban partners serving as our hosts and serving our meals was their way of contributing, whereas our way of contributing was by financing the camp? Or, were we instead enacting a way of relating in which we Canadians assumed the dominant role and our Cuban partners the subservient one—in other words, a position of servitude? Would it have been better for us to serve the Cubans, or would this also have reinforced notions of Cubans as in need of service? Where does generosity and graciousness fit into the equation? Since the course, we have begun to think more deeply about whether reciprocity is an appropriate guiding principle for service-learning partnerships, and if it is not, what we might turn to instead.

The Logic and Limitations of Reciprocity

Reciprocity, in the context of ISL partnerships, refers to a mutuality of respect, collaboration, and exchange between the ‘provider’ and the ‘recipient’ in the service-learning relationship (Henry & Breyfogle, 2006). Thus, programs built around the ethic of reciprocity are designed such that there exists a giving and receiving between the ‘server’ and the person or group ‘being served’ (Kendall, 1990). ISL programs committed to reciprocity must not be solely concerned with the development of participants, but equally to the growth and development of all parties involved, including the host community (Crabtree, 2008; Porter & Monard, 2001; Pusch & Merrill, 2008). Kendall (1990), drawing on Sigmon (1979), suggested that engaging in reciprocal relations includes creating an environment where all parties involved are learners and equally determine what will be learned. Jacoby (1996) added to this idea by suggesting that an ISL program based on reciprocity should aim to create a learning environment in which those serving and those being served become indistinguishable in principle, if not in practice. To Holland (2002), reciprocity involves “respect for different sources of knowledge, different contributions of each participant, a fair exchange of value, and the assurance of benefits to all” (p. 2).

The concept of reciprocity, which entered the dialogue of both service-learning and development work in the mid-1990s, was a way to provide a new guiding ethical principle to control for service-learning exchanges that might reproduce a paternalistic, one-way approach to service in which one person or group with resources shares those ‘charitably’ or ‘voluntarily’ with a person or group with fewer resources (Kendall, 1990). Even if these resources are put to good use, charity-based exchanges implicitly create an imbalanced relationship marking the students as ‘helpers’ and members of the community as ‘needy.’

While reciprocity may help us move beyond some problems in the service-learning relationship, it also introduces some of its own. Keith (2005), for example, has noted that reciprocity has always only been a ‘partial fit’ to service-learning and development. One of its primary limitations is that it is a concept rooted in exchange theory, and “with its focus on calculable transactions among self-interested individuals...can be seen as the sister of neo-liberalism” (p. 14). As Pratt (1992, in Johnson, 2009) notes, the framework of reciprocity suggests a mutually beneficial relationship, built on the assumption that both sides are equals and an implicit goal is “to achieve equilibrium through exchange” (p. 183). We can see how this implicit assumption played out in our question about our contribution of money in ‘exchange’ for the con-

tribution of mealtime service from our Cuban partners. However, Johnson (2009) poses some additional questions that problematize the exchange framework. For example, what constitutes equilibrium or a “fair exchange?” Is an exchange of money for work a balanced exchange? Is it fair to expect partners of vastly different social and economic statuses to contribute equally to the exchange? Underlying Johnson’s questions is a concern that the frame of reciprocity, which operates under the assumption of balance, may in fact be masking unequal power relations operating at both the micro and macro levels (Heron, 2006). At the very least, we are concerned with how the frame of reciprocity organizes service-learning partners into the binary of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ maintains a distance between partners, and reproduces, we believe, the notion of the partner as Other.

Crabtree (2008), while committed to an ethic of reciprocity, reminds us that “we need more than an ethos of reciprocity as a guide; we need to learn the...on-the-ground strategies that are more likely to produce mutuality” (emphasis in original, p. 26). This is how we are moving forward as well. We have made the decision to jettison reciprocity as our guiding principle so as to facilitate opening up space to explore with our partners the complications of the relationship and continue to imagine, refine, and reconstitute how we relate in a mutually beneficial way throughout the collaboration.

Third Point of Discomfort: Taxi Ride into Town

The rural location of the camp provided a jumping-off point for exploring the unique topography of Cuba. However, years of neglect due to economic hardship had left the camp in disrepair. Water shortages, broken toilets, and lack of refrigeration made it difficult to maintain hygiene. Heat, bugs, noisy animals, and frogs inside sleeping quarters kept students awake at night. The food was unfamiliar. As a result, the majority of Canadian students were suffering from sleep deprivation, diarrhea, stomach flu, and dehydration—as well as the general disorientation that came with adapting to rural Cuban life.

By the fourth day at the camp, some of the Canadian students were reaching their breaking point. The morning of day five, two students started the day with tears, simply at the prospect of having to spend another day in the camp. We decided to break from the schedule, tap into our financial reserves, and offer the Canadian students the option to take a taxi to Vinales, a nearby tourist-oriented town, to use toilets, have a shower, sleep, and eat a restaurant meal. All but two students accepted the offer. A telephone call was made, and soon five red, shiny (i.e., conspicuous-looking) taxicabs pulled up to the camp, driving through the gates and into the parking lot

where a game of baseball was being played by the Cuban students (who were not offered the option to leave) and the two Canadian students who had elected to stay behind. The Canadian students climbed in and the taxis drove away. The remaining students resumed their game.

At the time we debated about whether our decision to extend this offer of respite to the Canadian students was the ‘right’ one to make. Some of these discussions have been related to pedagogical considerations; for example, was the health of our students really suffering to the point that they were no longer able to engage as learners in the camp experience? Additionally, what learning did our students miss by not living out the day at camp? However, we also wonder, Why had we not invited the Cubans to come along? Although there was no negative reaction from the Cuban staff or students about our departure, was it because they were accustomed to, or at least not surprised by, this kind of behaviour?

Acknowledging Our Colonial History

The discomfort of this moment led us to recognize how we, as international service-learners, were not ‘innocent’ but instead bound up in the ongoing and still-unfolding colonial history of Cuba. Indeed, in its own small way, the scene of the taxicabs driving out of the gates invoked to us the well-told narrative of the foreigner being swept out of dangerous lands to be taken to safer, happier locales while the inhabitants are left behind. Certainly the lives of Canadian students were only in danger of being slightly uncomfortable for longer than they wished. However, in this moment we enacted the same privileges common to all Westerners travelling abroad—the privilege of being able to escape and having the means to do so. Since this course, new questions have begun to surface. For example, in what other ways might we be tied up with the colonialist project other than by being its beneficiaries? Could we also, in fact, be participating in its ongoing (re)production?

Our attempt to answer these questions has led us to consider our course within a much broader sociohistorical context. For example, we noted earlier that our course came into existence through a push within our university, as with many others across North America, to ‘internationalize’—a university project within which new international service-learning opportunities was only one manifestation. However, a question not asked at the time but now being asked by us is: Why is internationalization the new focus of the university? What underlies this new mandate, and whose interests does it serve?

Zemach-Bersin (2007), spurred on by her own experiences as a Western student travelling abroad, has addressed some of these questions. Although she

notes that internationalization is often framed within universities using the elusive yet justice-oriented language of ‘fostering global citizenship,’ Zemach-Bersin contrarily contends that internationalization is a movement primarily interested in maintaining Western domination on a global front, and that university support of internationalization is at its heart an act of compliance with broader governmental and business interests to assist in the production of a student body better equipped to fulfill national and corporate strategic interests on a global level.

When examined this way, university-based ISL programs are clearly implicated in the contemporary colonialist project, and in more than one way. Students travelling to foreign lands play a direct role in Western imperialism, akin to “missionaries, colonizers, anthropologists, and humanitarian aid workers who have served as ‘goodwill ambassadors,’ promoting the soft power interests of the metropole” (Zemach-Bersin, 2007, p. 24). This is not a new critique; Illich (1968) famously described North American “dogooders,” referring to U.S. volunteers in Mexico, as “vacationing salesmen for the middle-class American way of life.” Zemach-Bersin takes this further by suggesting that students unwittingly also engage in the same project of ‘extracting resources’ undergirding colonialism since its inception. However, in the contemporary knowledge economy of today, the resources that are of value in the extraction process are cultural knowledge and know-how, as it is this knowledge that makes the world knowable, and thus controllable and consumable.

Moving Forward

How has our analysis of these three points of discomfort impacted our ISL practice? First, we have revisited the various partnering relationships we established in the context of this course. We have decided to end some of them, most notably our ‘partnership’ with Eco-Institute. In so doing, we have not engaged in a ‘post-mortem analysis’ of the day of service with Eco-Institute staff that is certainly warranted and was recommended by one of the (Michigan Journal) reviewers. Instead, we thought about how to go about, and become more wary of, working with Cuban NGOs in general. While ISL literature often equates partnerships with NGOs as partnerships with ‘the community,’ Steinman (2011) reminds us that NGOs are *not* the community per se, but exist *in relation to* the community. In the service-learning context, NGOs are best understood as intermediaries between the service-learners and the community. As intermediaries, NGOs have their own set of power-laden relationships with the community that, as the garden day of service illustrated, may be unbalanced or exploitative. Our lesson in all of this is that NGO-community relationships need to be scrutinized before commit-

ting to work with an NGO. Key informants that know the local perspective of the NGO, or previous service partners, could provide helpful insight.

However, we have maintained our partnership with Manuel Fajardo, including continuing the international field course, which ran again in spring 2012. In between the offerings of the two courses, we made another visit to Cuba, where we had an extended (one week) visit with our university partners that included a trip back to the outdoor camp. In typical Cuban form, our conversations about past activities and future plans did not begin to occur until late into the week, after much socializing and reacquainting. In this space, we found the courage to share our points of discomfort with our Cuban partners, to gather their perspective on them. This has been helpful. For example, it turned out that they were not offended by our taxi ride to town. In fact, after the students left our partners laughed about how fragile the Canadians must have been to warrant a trip out of camp! However, they were as concerned as we were about the poor hygiene of the camp, and we strategized about how to address this—a conversation that resulted in students in the 2012 course bringing cooking implements, water purifiers, and plumbing supplies with them to the camp. Our partners were also troubled about the mealtime service habit we had formed, and felt that it was important that this work be shared. However, we also learned that an even greater concern for the Cuban partner was the way that, due to the Canadian students having prepared program activities whereas the Cuban students had not, the Canadian students were regularly in the position of leader while the Cuban students were cast in the role of learner. This set up an undesirable imbalance between the two groups, precluding the Cuban students from assuming leadership roles. With this in mind, the 2012 program involved both Canadians and Cubans in the ‘work’ of the camp, including kitchen help and meal service, as well as in taking responsibility for instructional time.

Second, we have continued to problematize the notion of ‘service’ in the ISL (and service-learning) context. Whereas the points of discomfort led us to critically consider ‘reciprocity’ as a guiding framework, since returning we have found ourselves increasingly uncomfortable with framing this course as a form of ‘service-learning.’ Ironically, just as service-learning is gaining traction within our university, we have become reluctant to align our teaching with this effort. In the university environment, including ours, service-learning is generally conceived as an encounter between university students who take on the role of ‘server’ and the community as the ‘served.’ This is problematic for a number of reasons. One reason is that as with reciprocity, it

organizes students and the community into an ‘us’ and ‘them’ binary that reproduces the community as Other (Powell, Pate, & Johnson, 2011). Another reason is that our common understanding of service tends to focus on “students taking action for the community partner” (Steinman, 2011, p. 6), a perspective that tends to position students as knowers, as actors, and as the solver of community problems—all of which, as Cruz (1990) has noted, perpetuates a colonial mentality and “deliver[s] a message of superiority” (p. 322). Cruz, in fact, provocatively suggested that the notion of service is so problematic that the field would go further in achieving its goals were it to think of service as “not involved at all” (p. 323). Others have pointed out that action is often not what the community is looking for, and that a higher priority might be placed on students engaging as listeners or witnesses (Steinman).

It is the critique of service as a paternalizing framework that has led to the emergence of decolonizing frameworks to guide educational endeavours that involve students engaging with a community outside the university. Whether international education that prescribes to one of these frameworks should be considered service-learning is a matter worthy of consideration. However, we can relate to this desire for an alternative framework as well. In fact, in our 2011 meeting where we discussed the purpose and intent of our course with our Cuban partners, we came to the viewpoint that the framework that should guide our partnership was *solidarity*. First, framing our partnership as solidarity brought us into better alignment with the Cuban mentality, as solidarity is a core philosophy of Cuban socio-political action. Second, because of its focus on intercultural exchange and dialogue, a solidarity framework has helped to reduce distance and encourage students to work together with “compassionate imagination” (Baker-Boorsma, 2006). Finally, and similar to Steinman’s (2011) framework of ‘making space,’ a solidarity framework allowed us to focus on the encounter as the end goal in and of itself, meaning that our route to social change was through our effort to create a space in which students experienced what Steinman termed “decolonizing relating” (p. 14).

Third, we have revisited how we have prepared our students for the service-learning encounter. In our first iteration, we believed that we were effectively preparing students for their international experience. As noted earlier, we spent four months moving through a curriculum that taught students about Cuba, prepared them to travel internationally, as well as assisted them in developing a program plan that would resonate with Cuban learners. However, upon reflection, we realized that we were focusing too heavily on teaching students *about* Cuba, which in

fact helped to maintain the perspective of Cuba itself as the ‘studied Other.’ We changed our teaching to focus on helping students self-reflexively analyze the various ways that they were implicated in the history and politics of Cuban life. Along with exploring differences, we also drew on the ways that Canada and Cuba were interconnected (e.g., shared history of colonization and resource extraction, complicated relations with the U.S., longtime political allies; extensive Canadian-Cuban tourism). Rather than focusing solely on the positive aspects of ISL, we posed complicated and provocative questions about interpersonal relations that drew attention to power asymmetries, such as who should pay at restaurants, if kissing can be construed as sex tourism, and donations, tipping, and gifting. We worked to help students deconstruct their “desire to serve” (Heron, 2007) by exposing students to the positive as well as critical scholarship on international service-learning, and at the end of the course, asking that they write about the impact that they had on Cuba *and* the impact that Cuba had on them. Finally, we heavily invested in preparing students to be able to care for themselves in the rugged conditions they would encounter so as to maximize the potential for engagement with the Cubans.

Most of all, however, exploring these moments of discomfort has helped us begin to identify the ambiguities, asymmetries, contradictions, and complex histories enmeshed with contemporary ISL practice. We have come to recognize ISL as an *encumbered* practice—a practice constituted in and by multiple positions structured through power relations (Heron, 2007). As practitioners, we cannot ignore or even minimize these ambiguities and contradictions with philosophical frameworks or effective program planning. Instead, moving forward requires ongoing dialogue, honest feedback, and owning up to and rectifying mistakes.

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